

PROFILES

LEBANON MOSLEMS

Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadrallah, Spokesman For Islamic Situation

Sheikh Mohammed Hussein Fadrallah, the Shiite Moslem scholar often identified in the local and foreign news media as the spiritual mentor of the Iranian-backed Hizbullah (Party of God), seems to be exerting a great deal of influence in Lebanon's political life. Fadrallah is perhaps one of the very few religious or even political leaders who have managed to gain the respect and admiration of both his friends and foes on both sides of the sectarian divide. Some Christian leaders have once described him as an "intelligent man with profound knowledge and foresight". Despite his repeated denial, Fadrallah's name has always been linked to Hizbullah ever since the fundamentalist party began gaining ground and consolidating its power base in Lebanon in 1984. The majority of Lebanese Moslems and Christians as well as foreign states consider Fadrallah as the most influential leader in the Party of God. In addition to his alleged influence on Hizbullah, Fadrallah plays a major role in the Iranian-backed Islamic Movement in Lebanon. The movement last year named Fadrallah along with three other Moslem religious leaders for the post of what it termed "the Presidency of Islamic Republic in Lebanon."

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A Leader: The west Beirut weekly magazine ASH SHIRAA said Fadrallah, whether he likes it or not, has become "a Lebanese leader" for whom people fight each other, either because they love him or because they hate him.

"He (Fadrallah) represents a symbol and an advanced leading position in the Islamic Movement in Lebanon. Consequently, he is, also whether he likes it or not, the candidate of the Shiite Moslem fundamentalism to the presidency of the state if this movement succeeded in turning Lebanon into an Islamic republic, or a republic where a Moslem is allowed to become a President," ASH SHIRAA wrote last week.

It said Fadrallah, who was promoted to an ayatullah earlier this year, is a man of knowledge and religion who had come from one of the distinctive Shiite religious houses. It said conferring the title of an "ayatullah" on Fadrallah, a rank which is granted in Iran to a religious cleric who has reached the degree of Islamic Jurisprudence, is a confirmation by Moslem fundamentalist circles that "Al Sayyed" (Fadrallah) is their "undisputed religious authority in Lebanon."

When Fadrallah came to Lebanon in 1966, he did not at the beginning play a political role, but chose to live in one of the poorest Shiite areas in Nabaa, east Beirut, where he worked to enlighten people on Moslem religion, ASH SHIRAA said.

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It added that with the outbreak of the Islamic revolution in Iran and its subsequent victory, Fadlallah had emerged as a supporter of the revolution that had toppled the late Shah in 1979 and brought the clergymen to power in Tehran. Since then, Fadlallah's religious activity has taken a clear political turn through the attitudes he had declared on various occasions toward general local and Islamic issues, the magazine said.

Islamic Movement: Fadlallah said he was not the leader of the Islamic Movement in Lebanon. "I don't present myself as a leader (of the Islamic Movement). But, in the eyes of many Moslems in Lebanon and elsewhere, I play a major role in this movement," he was quoted as saying by ASH SHIRAA.

Similarly, he has frequently denied he was the spiritual mentor of Hizbullah, adding that he has no links whatsoever to the party. He also said he rejects to play any political, spiritual or organizational role in Hizbullah. "I have no links whatsoever to Hizbullah with regard to the party's organizational structure. I am not a spiritual guide of Hizbullah. I refuse to play any political, spiritual or organizational role in the narrow partisan circle. Rather, I work in the general Islamic atmosphere that goes beyond Lebanon," Fadlallah said in an interview with MER last June.

Profile: Fadlallah is the son of a prominent Shiite Moslem scholar, the late Abdel-Raouf Fadlallah who hailed from the village of Ainata, southern Lebanon. Fadlallah was born in the holy Shiite city of Najaf in Iraq in 1935. He studied in Najaf and majored in Islamic Jurisprudence. He spent a total of 36 years in Iraq during which he took part in Islamic Jurisprudence, cultural and social activities and delivered lectures. He also cooperated with another Shiite Moslem scholar, the late Mohammed Baqer Sadr in laying the foundations of Islamic political action in the Moslem world.

Fadlallah came to Lebanon in 1966 and lived for ten years in Nabaa, where he established religious, cultural and health centers as well as a public library. When Nabaa fell to Christian militias, he moved in 1977 to the predominantly Shiite southern suburbs of Beirut where he also set up religious and cultural institutes. He also established an orphanage at Doha, south of Beirut.

Fadlallah is married with seven boys and four girls. He is the author of more than 40 books on Islam and a collection of poems. He delivers political and religious lectures in mosques, cultural gatherings and in local universities.

Despite his denial of the Hizbullah connection, Fadlallah was the focus of local and regional contacts to end the inter-Shiite war for the control of the Beirut southern suburbs that broke out last May between militiamen of Hizbullah the mainstream Shiite Amal movement. The three weeks of pitched gunbattles came to an end on May 27 after about 5,000 Syrian soldiers took up positions in the southern suburbs.

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Fadlallah said he mediated in the inter-Shiite conflict in his capacity as an Islamic religious authority. "I represent an Islamic religious authority in Lebanon. I oversee the entire Islamic Movement within all Moslem groups, including Hizbullah, in my capacity as an authority in Islamic Jurisprudence," he told MER. "I exert a spiritual influence on Islamic groups, including Hizbullah."

Hostage Issue: Fadlallah's remarks on various local and regional political issues are often taken into account. Whenever he touched in his speeches on the issue of foreigners held hostage in Lebanon, his remarks drew a swift response from the states that have citizens held captive.

Fadlallah recently urged the countries whose some of its citizens are held hostage in Lebanon to negotiate directly with the kidnappers. There are about 18 foreigners, including nine Americans, missing in Lebanon, believed kidnapped by pro-Iranian extremist Shiite groups linked to Hizbullah which has frequently denied involvement in hostage-taking.

Fadlallah has taken a moderate stance on the problem of hostages all along and condemned all kinds of kidnappings. He said last month that time has come for a "happy ending" to the plight of foreign hostages in Lebanon. "The case of foreign hostages in Lebanon is a mixture of human suffering and politics. Time has come for a happy ending to their plight", he told worshippers at a mosque in Beirut's southern suburbs on July 24.

He spoke in the Hizbullah stronghold of Bir Al Abed on Eid Al Adha, the Moslem feast of sacrifice marking the completion of the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia. "We feel pain for the detention (of the hostages) because the issue has humanitarian aspects," Fadlallah said.

Islamic Republic: Fadlallah considers that raising the slogan of a Moslem Republic in Lebanon is premature since conditions are not favorable for it. He said on various occasions that Islam is still being viewed by other Lebanese communities from a sectarian angle.

"The aim is to establish an Islamic state to govern as God has revealed, though I do not see that this is possible in Lebanon in the foreseeable future since Islam is still being viewed by other Lebanese communities from a sectarian angle.

The Islam which we want and which we are proposing is far removed from sectarianism. It is an international, humanitarian system," he said. "This idea needs a lot of efforts to explain, and we are doing so."

"The Socialist Party in France seeks to convert its country, which is a big capitalist state, into a Socialist state, and Communist parties in the Arab world and elsewhere seek to get to power and apply communism. Why are we being blamed for what is allowed to others? As for the means of application, we are the first to advocate giving the freedom of choice to the people," he added.